

# FRIENDS

## of the UPPER EAST SIDE HISTORIC DISTRICTS

*Friends of the Upper East Side Historic Districts, founded in 1982, is an independent, not-for-profit membership organization dedicated to preserving the architectural legacy, livability, and sense of place of the Upper East Side.*

SPRING 2019

## NEWS FROM FRIENDS

### LETTER FROM THE PRESIDENT



*The Coalition to Save Marx Brothers Playground, seen here with our attorneys following oral arguments in the case in March 2019.*

You've probably heard the phrase about creating legislation that is attributed to the 19th century German Chancellor Otto Von Bismark: "If you like laws and sausages, you should never watch either one being made."

Whether he, or anyone, ever said it, you get the point. Legislating can be messy, and possibly stuff gets spilled on the floor. But eventually, maybe, you end up with something good.

A case in point has been the recent process that has brought the beginnings of some control to the advent of "supertalls" mostly, so far, in Midtown. But, unlike Chancellor von Bismark, I have found the process very heartening, not perfect for sure, but productive,

and an extraordinary example of the value of neighborhood-based community organizations like FRIENDS working in collaboration with each other and our elected officials.

When the skinny tower at 432 Park Avenue sprang up in Midtown, community groups around the city were taken by surprise. Together we turned to urban planning expert George Janes, who identified various loopholes in zoning that developers were exploiting. Meanwhile, in the Sutton Place area, ERFA, the East River Fifties Alliance, was working heroically, and successfully, to design a rezoning that would protect the low-rise character of the neighborhood. And

on East 88th Street and Third Avenue, Carnegie Hill Neighbors and Friends of the Upper East Side began a challenge to a building that used gerrymandered zoning to increase its height. Across town, the Committee for Environmentally Sound Development and the Municipal Art Society were challenging a proposed tower at 200 Amsterdam Avenue that scraped up an attenuated spider's web of air rights from adjacent open space to inflate the building. And on West 66th Street, Landmark West! filed a challenge to another supertall that, like the others, poses a serious threat to first responders. Finally, on East 96th Street, there is a proposal by the Educational Construction Fund for a mixed-use, combined market rate and affordable residential tower on the site of Marx Brothers Playground. A broad coalition of groups including preservation, parks, and environmental advocates is challenging this use of the playground, asserting that it is legally a New York City Park, and must be held forever in the public trust. These groups include Carnegie Hill Neighbors, Civitas, FRIENDS of the UES, the Municipal Art Society, New Yorkers for Parks, and the Trust for Public Land.

Our elected officials bolstered these efforts with hard-hitting letters to the City Planning Commission's Chair in August 2018 and again in January 2019. Signed by the Bor-

*continued on page 3.*

# Forgotten Treasure Temporarily On View



*A monumental vestige of the Chapel of St. Joseph's Orphan Asylum at 402 East 90th Street. Once the neighboring athletic facility is completed, this facade will permanently be obscured. Photo: Sarah Greig Photography/FRIENDS of the Upper East Side.*

The demolition of a parking garage at 412 East 90th Street exposed the full extent of remnants of the chapel of the long forgotten St. Joseph's Orphan Asylum. Though passersby looking west on East 90th Street have long been able to catch a small glimpse of the striking neo-Classical ornaments, the facade's full grandeur has been partially obscured since the early 20th century. This orphanage, which fostered children mostly of German descent, once occupied a campus located on the entire city block bounded by 89th and 90th Streets and First and York Avenues. The church served as an important institution for these children and the broader Catholic community on the Upper East Side, offering meals, housing, schooling, religious services and catechism. With the end of World War I and the soaring land values in anticipation of the returning veterans, St. Joseph's began selling off parcels of its land. Deconsecrated in 1918 and subsequently sold, the facade miraculously remained intact after two conversions, first as an early automobile garage and later converted and significantly expanded for residential use. At pres-

ent, it is embedded into a 12-story condominium building located at 402 East 90th Street.

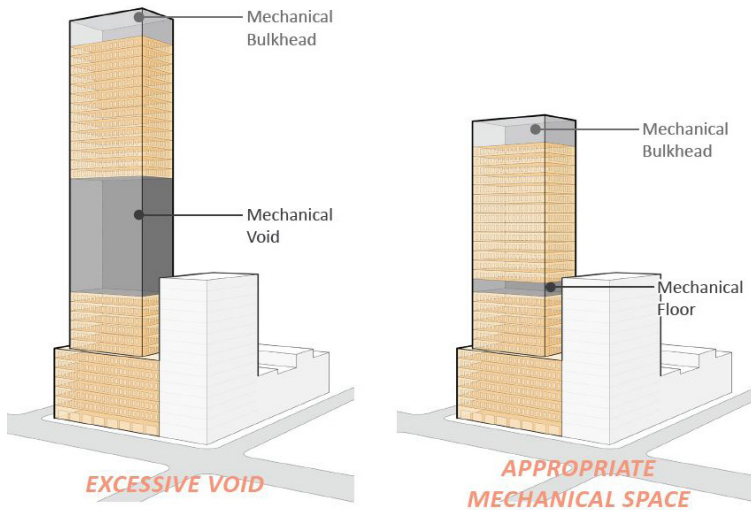
Before New York City's street grid was mapped, this block was part of a parcel of land once owned by Nathaniel Prime. His waterfront estate extended all the way to the East River, and the property's mansion was situated on the center of this block between East 89th and East 90th Streets. As the area evolved from a summer village for New York's well-to-do into a neighborhood of waterfront industry and new residential development, social service institutions such as libraries, settlement houses, and orphanages flourished in Yorkville. St. Joseph's followed suit and initially utilized the Prime Mansion as the home of the Orphan Asylum. As the institution grew, so did its occupation of the block. Additional structures were built to accommodate dormitories, classrooms, and new places of worship. Around the time that St. Joseph's sold the land in 1918, the Prime Mansion was demolished, but the chapel with its grandiose temple front quietly remains as a visual representation of the block's past on the newly converted garage.

This fascinating piece of history has somehow survived, but it is set to be covered by a new athletic facility being constructed by the Spence School at the neighboring lot where another garage once stood. The proposed 6-story facility will rise 85 feet high and completely obscure the facade from view, thus concealing this important piece of Yorkville history permanently.

FRIENDS has thoroughly documented this mesmerizing relic and the surrounding block, as this site synthesizes much of the local history that FRIENDS has long been dedicated to uncovering and sharing. The remnant was also profiled by local journalist Doug Feiden in two articles featured in *Our Town*: "The Ghostly Remnant" and "The Eternal Orphanage." The uniquely preserved facade contains the final pieces of the brick and mortar that once comprised the full-block orphanage complex.

Father Boniface Ramsey, the pastor of the present day St. Joseph's Church at East 87th Street, has partnered with FRIENDS to find creative methods to commemorate the remaining history of this lost neighborhood institution. Although efforts to have the site recognized as a local landmark by the Landmarks Preservation Commission, or preserved in situ by the school, were unsuccessful, there has been progress. Due largely to Mr. Boniface's efforts, along with New York City Council Member Ben Kallos, the Spence School has agreed to include interpretive measures into their new facility that will honor the memory of this unique site that contributed to a broad network of social services once common in Yorkville. The new facility will include a commemorative plaque and a brief exhibit about the history of St. Joseph's Orphan Asylum on the block, and the school may also include this history in their curriculum. ♦

## ZONING REFORM: CITY LEGISLATIVE UPDATES



*This graphic, produced by the Department of City Planning, compares excessive mechanical void space to an appropriately-sized mechanical void (shown in gray) currently not counted towards a tower's residential floor area, (shown in yellow), contrasted with a 25-foot void, which is the proposed threshold for exempt mechanical voids under the proposed zoning text amendment.*

A zoning text amendment proposed by the Department of City Planning (DCP) intended to curtail the scale and frequency of excess mechanical void space, currently exempt from zoning calculations, is making its way through the City's public review process. This amendment was brought about largely through the advocacy by FRIENDS, our colleagues at Landmark West!, and neighborhood-minded advocates citywide. While a positive first step, the City's proposal takes a narrow view of the issue by focusing solely on discouraging enclosed mechanical void spaces and setting thresholds for such spaces that are far more generous than necessary. DCP has failed to include unenclosed mechanical voids and stilted stories, and to impose meaningful limits on exempt mechanical spaces, so the resulting proposal is too weak a fix to sufficiently prevent developers from building unnecessary voids to boost the heights of new residential buildings.

Ironically, the proposal will not impact the "Jetsons" building at 249 East 62nd Street, which features an egregious 150

foot void and galvanized both FRIENDS' and DCP's work on this issue. See page 4 for an alternate policy proposed at the State level that would impact this building.

Despite the shortcomings of this new text amendment, there is continued hope in the fight to "void the voids." Though weak, this action represents the City's first step in addressing the zoning loopholes contributing to overdevelopment, and that is significant. In addition, DCP has committed to a second phase this summer that will expand the applicability of this text to residential buildings in central business districts including lower Manhattan, Midtown, Hudson Yards, downtown Brooklyn, and Long Island City. The administration has also publicly committed to studying unenclosed voids and stilts. While the first phase of this text amendment is expected to be approved early this summer, FRIENDS and our colleagues continue to advocate for a broader scope in the second action that will put a meaningful stop to the full range of zoning loopholes, including excess floor to ceiling heights and gerrymandered zoning lots. ♦

## LETTER FROM THE PRESIDENT

*continued from page 1.*

ough President and all ten Manhattan delegates of the New York City Council, the letters cited the "tremendous work done by our community stakeholders and advocacy groups...to curb excessive, illogical development [and developers'] numerous novel workarounds...The resulting out-of-context buildings have spurred community organizing like never before, as everyday residents have committed significant time and resources to highlighting arcane but deeply impactful issues in our zoning rules."

Pivotal moments occurred at two Town Hall meetings with Mayor de Blasio in January 2018

and 2019. Last year our Executive Director Rachel Levy described to the Mayor a building proposed for East 62nd Street and Second Avenue that would contain a 150' void, and was being challenged by FRIENDS. He was visibly surprised, and turned to Marissa Lago, the Chair of the Planning Commission, for a response. After agreeing to study it last year, this January she committed to having a geographically comprehensive proposal this summer, although only regulating the voids, not other "workarounds."

The first phase of the Commission's proposal to "void the voids," as we like to say, is going through public review now, and you can read more detail in the article above. Not surprisingly,

it is not all we would like, but it isn't sausage, and as I see it the process was very heartening. Community groups learned quickly about common threats and the inadequacies of the Zoning Resolution and Building Code, and joined forces with our committed and articulate elected officials to get results. We continue to put pressure on the city to complete the task – to "lose the loopholes" – and affirm zoning policy that supports community character and livability.

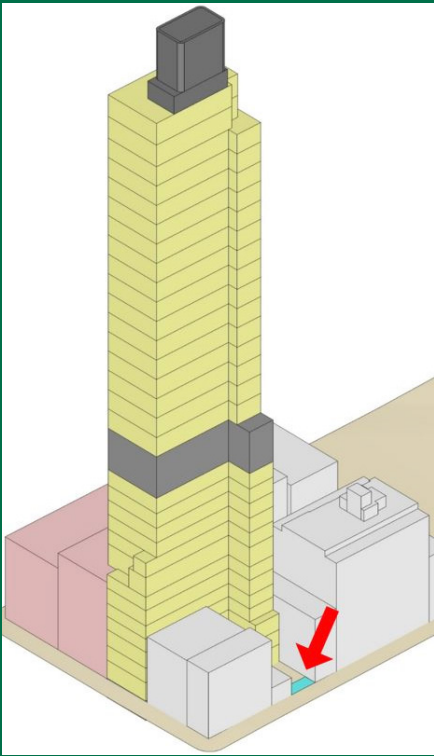
Sincerely,

*Franny Eberhart*

Franny Eberhart



# LOSING THE BATTLE BUT WINNING THE WAR? POSSIBLE STATE-WIDE REFORMS SOFTEN BLOW OF ONGOING SUPERTALL CONSTRUCTION



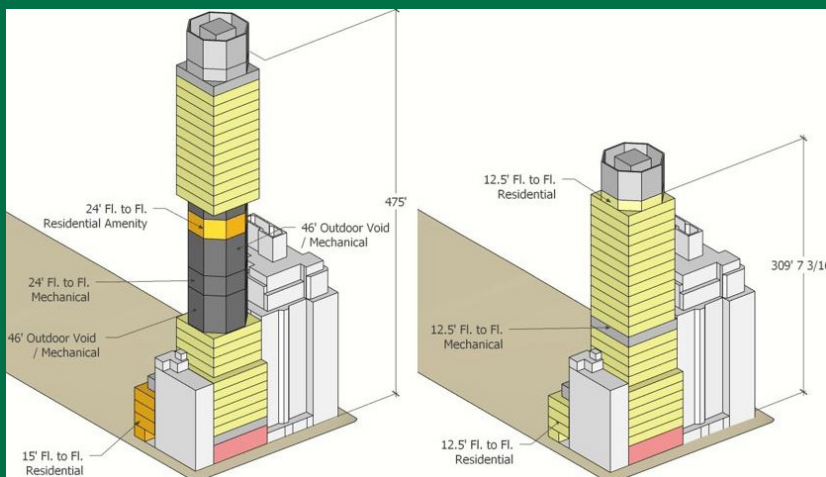
*Rendering of 180 East 88th Street showing the now-approved carved-off portion of the lot in blue. Credit: George M. Janes and Associates.*

In December 2018 the Board of Standards and Appeals (BSA) issued a final 4-1 vote against FRIENDS and Carnegie Hill Neighbors' challenge of 180 East 88th Street's zoning approval. Our case sought to reverse the City's approval of the annexation of a small portion of the lot's 88th street frontage into a separate, unbuildable micro-lot – an action taken by the developer for no purpose other than to evade zoning regulations that would have impacted the design and bulk of the building. BSA Commissioners reasoned that the Department of Buildings (DOB) acted reasonably in approving the 10 foot lot because the zoning text does not prescribe minimum lot size. In her remarks, Chair Margery Perlmutter acknowledged the deficiency of zoning regulations regarding the exploitation of zoning loopholes, and suggested that the Department of City Planning (DCP) address and correct this issue. Though we are disheartened by the BSA's decision, the deferral to DCP underscores FRIENDS' vocal efforts.

While the City is now acting to study and close the loopholes, notable mega-towers like the “Jetsons” tower with a hexagonal empty core at 249 East 62nd Street, and the controversial tower at 50 West 66th Street—set to be the Upper West Side's tallest—will not even be addressed by the DCP's proposed text.

Luckily, a separate proposal has come from Albany. In the State Legislature, Upper West Side Assembly Member Linda Rosenthal has introduced a bill (A.5026) that would modify the New York State Multiple Dwelling Law (MDL) in relation to floor area. This bill aims to curb residential supertall development through hard limits on exempt mechanical space, and regulation of floor-to-ceiling heights and exempted outdoor spaces. (See image below.)

The City and State approaches to closing the mechanical void loopholes differ in both content and procedure, but the good news is that lawmakers at both levels of the government agree on the urgent need to maintain predictability in new design and construction and to limit developers' ability to build sky-high by manipulating the zoning laws. These two related but different proposals are crucial first steps towards formally closing zoning loopholes and regulating buildings in high density districts in terms of their 21st century needs and limitations.



*Schematic massing diagrams depicting the proposed tower at 249 East 62nd Street. The diagram on the left, showing a 475' tower with an octagonal void, is based on plans filed in 2017. The image on the right shows a 309' tower that includes the same amount of residential floor space, but under the constraints of a proposed bill to alter New York State's Multiple Dwelling Law. Image Credit: George M. Janes and Associates.*

The Assembly bill presents a broad framework for reform that FRIENDS was instrumental in shaping. It is a much more comprehensive approach than the City's proposal, and we are hopeful that the parallel proposals of these two varied approaches to different aspects of the loophole problem will enrich the public discourse around these ideas and lead to more productive, and effective, policy outcomes. ♦

# FROM THE STREETS TO YOUR SCREEN: 700,000 IMAGES OF 1940s NEW YORK NOW AVAILABLE ONLINE



1940's Tax photo of 945-940 Fifth Avenue from the Municipal Archive's newly-digitized collection.

On November 1, 2018, the Municipal Archives announced the completion of its digitalization of the 720,000 photos taken by the Works Progress Administration and the New York City Department of Taxation between 1939 - 1941. Initially collected to be used as a tool in determining property value assessments, the archives have served a greater future purpose. The long-anticipated digital archive of the 1940s Tax Photos has proven to be a crucial resource in researching the history of our city's buildings. A task more than 30 years in the making, it was well worth the wait as these photos have proved vital in our preservation efforts.

FRIENDS is thrilled at the enhanced ability that these photos gives us in our efforts to preserve the livability and sense of place on the Upper East Side. Besides providing a look at the street view from the 1940s, these photos offer valuable insight into the historic conditions of buildings and neighborhoods. Moreover, they inform our stance on renovation proposals and alterations to historic properties in order to ensure these changes keep in line with the historic character of the Upper East Side.

What once was a long and arduous process of traveling to the Municipal Archives, or waiting for a large, glossy photo to arrive by mail, has come to an end. The digitalization of the photos allows us to find what we are looking for at the click of the button, allowing us to work more efficiently to preserve the UES.

If you would like to take a closer look at what your building, or buildings in your neighborhood look like, we strongly encourage you to visit the Municipal Archives site at (<http://nycma.lunaimaging.com/luna/servlet/NYCMA~5~5>). Just use the NYCMap to find your block and lot number. Happy exploring! ♦

## FIFTEENTH ANNUAL AMBASSADOR TO THE UPPER EAST SIDE AWARD DINNER



Honoree Arete Warren, center, with Chairs Carol and Richard J. Miller.

On Monday, October 1st, 2018 FRIENDS of the Upper East Side Historic Districts proudly presented The Fifteenth Annual Ambassador to the Upper East Side Awards to Arete Warren. Nearly 200 friends from New York City, and beyond, gathered at the Metropolitan Club to celebrate Arete's countless contributions to the worlds of preservation, gardening, and art.



Congresswoman Carolyn Maloney addressed the audience, as FRIENDS President Franny Eberhart looked on.

Arete came to preservation when the National Trust asked her in 1974 to establish the Royal Oak Foundation in New York to help preserve historic English houses and open spaces. She had previously worked at the Victoria and Albert Museum under John Pope-Hennessy, and then at the Cooper-Hewitt. Since then, we have all benefited from Arete's passion and trained eye.

She is a scholar of decorative arts and architecture and a garden-design expert, and there is hardly an aspect of civic life in New York that Arete hasn't touched. Her commitment to protecting what makes New York livable is demonstrated by her leadership roles on the New York State Board for Historic Preservation, the Empire State Plaza Art Commission, the Preservation League of New York State, the Metropolitan Opera and the Garden Club of America.

Special thanks to our Benefit Committee who contributed immeasurably to the success of the evening, especially Chairs Carol and Richard J. Miller Jr., and Vice-Chairs Ann Ziff, Judith-Ann Corrente and Willem Kooyker, Carole and John French III, Patricia Begley and George Beane, Sanford W. Morhouse, Sondra Gilman and Celso Gonzalez-Falla, Dotty and Lionel Goldfrank III, and Barbara and James Reibel. It was a festive and wonderful celebration for all! ♦



# HIGHLIGHTS FROM YOUNG FRIENDS

This year, Young FRIENDS has been proud to partner with Union Settlement Association of East Harlem. We are providing our architecture enrichment programs after school to students in seven community centers from this venerable organization, founded in 1895. Young FRIENDS also continues to serve children in many other schools and organizations in East Harlem as well as on the Upper East Side. ♦



Maria Merchand's 4th grade class from P.S. 83 pose in front of (now closed) neighborhood favorite Glaser's Bake Shop.



Fifth graders from the Union Settlement Gaylord-White After School Program pose with Site Leader Desmond Reid and Group Leader Danny Ortega to celebrate their Building Fun scavenger hunt victory.



## OUR YORKVILLE SERIES CONTINUES!



Local Historian Kathy Jolowicz poses with boards from "Memories of Yorkville's Kleindeutschland," her exhibit on the cultural history and development of Yorkville's German population.

FRIENDS continues to offer exciting public programs to showcase and celebrate unique features of the Upper East Side we all know and love. In the fall of 2018 and early 2019, FRIENDS offered a fascinating series of lectures and walking tours on topics ranging from the exotic treasures of the Explorers Club's collections, the wonders of German Yorkville, to the near-mythic crusades of Archbishop John Hughes.

To explore the origins of Yorkville's German-town, last October noted tour guide Jus-

tin Ferate led a rousing walking tour of Kleindeutschland in the East Village, the area where many Germans and their descendants settled before moving uptown. The tour included a private visit to the former St. Mark's Evangelical Church, the parish of many residents whose families perished in the 1904 General Slocum disaster, which contributed to the movement northward of many Germans and the significant growth of Yorkville's German community.

On Tuesday, February 5th, FRIENDS Executive Director Rachel Levy and Preservation Associate Sara Kamillatos were warmly welcomed at Yorkville's Webster Library to present *Shaped by Immigrants: A History of Yorkville* as a part of their "Author Talk" Series. We were glad to be joined by FRIENDS members as well as new faces to discuss the development of this fascinating neighborhood through the lens of the surviving buildings originally constructed to serve the populations of Czech, Irish, German, and Hungarian immigrants who settled in this waterfront community.

On a sunny Saturday in March, FRIENDS was pleased to welcome neighborhood historian Kathy Jolowicz to display her comprehensive exhibit on Yorkville's Germantown roots from the Colonial period through the 20th Century. It was an enjoyable afternoon filled with German food from Schaller and Weber, traditional German dirndls and lederhosen, and warm remembrances of Yorkville's Kleindeutschland of yore. Kathy shared tales of her life growing up in this bustling immigrant community and offered insight on its many changes over the years.

These events, supported in part by public funds from the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs in partnership with the City Council, were an extension of our spotlight on Yorkville in our programs over the last year. Such programs dovetail with the release of FRIENDS' original book, *Shaped by Immigrants: A History of Yorkville*, available for purchase on our website and at independent bookstores in the neighborhood. ♦

## THE 130TH UPPER EAST SIDE LANDMARK?



*First Hungarian Reformed Church, designed by Emery Roth and built in 1916, on East 69th Street Between First and Second Avenues.*

The Landmarks Preservation Commission (LPC) held a public hearing on March 26, 2019 to consider the First Hungarian Reformed Church as an individual landmark in Manhattan. Located at 346 East 69th Street in the Yorkville neighborhood, the church is a striking example of 20th century vernacular design, and was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 2000.

Completed in 1916 by architect Emery Roth, a notable Hungarian New York City architect, this church is his only Christian religious building. The church holds an important place in the history of the Upper East Side and its Hungarian community because it was, and remains, a gathering spot and place of familiarity for the immigrant community. The small, two-story building with a central tower, yellow stucco facade, and a red shingled roof, recalls village churches throughout Eastern Europe. The vernacular Hungarian style coupled with these details, make it a unique structure and focal point of its block.

With Yorkville almost completely unprotected by landmark designation, culturally significant sites such as this are crucial in preserving the cultural legacy of our community. Moreover, with the rapid pace of new-construction and rising rents that are forcing small business that define our community to close, protecting cultural institutions is more crucial than ever. The First Hungarian Reformed Church is a unique and exotic adaptation of the vernacular Hungarian style, and as such it should be protected as a symbol of the Upper East Side's ethnic diversity.

Preserving this church is the latest in FRIENDS' endeavors to protect and celebrate the unique cultural heritage of Yorkville. LPC Chair Sarah Carroll said that the LPC's research staff has been focused on examining the immigrant history of Yorkville and that the First Hungarian Church is a highly intact and rare extant reminder of the neighborhood's Hungarian legacy. Follow our updates on the landmarking status of this unique piece of Yorkville history, and stay tuned for a formal vote expected later this year! ♦

## IN MEMORIAM O. KELLEY ANDERSON AND MIMI LEVITT



We mourn the passing of **O. Kelley Anderson**, FRIENDS' Treasurer since 1994. Kelley began his professional life on Wall Street, but in the middle of a successful career, realized his true calling in the art world. For 25 years, Kelley was a director at the Coe Kerr Gallery, one of the premier dealers of American art. Founded in partnership with the collector Frederick Woolworth, the Coe Kerr Gallery exhibited renowned artists such as Andrew Wyeth, Mary Cassatt, John Singer Sargent, and Andy Warhol.

In 1989 Kelley founded The Art Show, the first art fair of its kind in New York City. Presented by the Art Dealers Association of America, the show drew more than 12,000 visitors, including top collectors, to the Park Avenue Armory, and raised thousands for the Henry Street Settlement. The Art Show continues to this day, setting the standards of excellence with museum-quality exhibitions. Though Kelley professed not to know much about formal preservation, he had unfailing instincts, and his questions were always the ones we needed to be asking. We are so grateful for Kelley's faithful and generous service and his dedication to FRIENDS.



Also this year, we sadly lost one of our founders, **Mimi Levitt**. Mimi was a preservationist before the movement began in New York City, restoring a rowhouse on East 82nd Street with her husband as early as 1950. She later led an effort to designate the Metropolitan Museum Historic District, and remained a devoted and outspoken advocate for the neighborhood for the rest of her life. Mimi and her late husband, Mortimer, founded the Levitt Foundation which supports creative place making and the performing arts. Individually, Mimi was an active supporter of the Metropolitan Opera, Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts, the School of American Ballet, and others. ♦



# FRIENDS

of the UPPER EAST SIDE  
HISTORIC DISTRICTS

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## OUR MISSION

FRIENDS of the Upper East Side Historic Districts, founded in 1982, is an independent, not-for-profit membership organization dedicated to preserving the architectural legacy, livability, and sense of place of the Upper East Side. In addition to monitoring the Upper East Side's seven historic districts and 129 individual landmarks, FRIENDS has also been a leader in successful efforts to improve the zoning laws governing the area's avenues and residential side streets. Through effective advocacy and successful educational programs, FRIENDS acts as a steward safeguarding the future of all Upper East Side historic districts and the designated and contributing buildings that make those districts special.

## 2019 BOARD OF DIRECTORS

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## IN GRATITUDE

FRIENDS of the Upper East Side Historic Districts wishes to acknowledge the generous support of: Joan K. Davidson (The J.M. Kaplan Fund), the New York State Council on the Arts, the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs, City Council Member Keith Powers, City Council Member Benjamin Kallos, and the Selz Foundation.

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